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MINNA AND MYSELF

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MAXWELL BODENHEIM

Minna and Myself

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Pagan Publishing Company

New York City

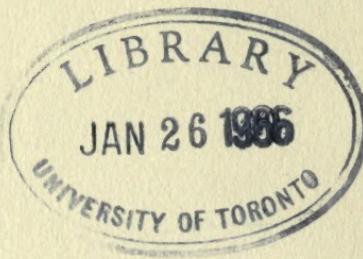
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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The *Little Review*; *Poetry*; the *New Republic*; the *Century*; the *New York Tribune*; the *Touchstone*; the *Seven Arts*; the *Pagan*; the *Egoist*.



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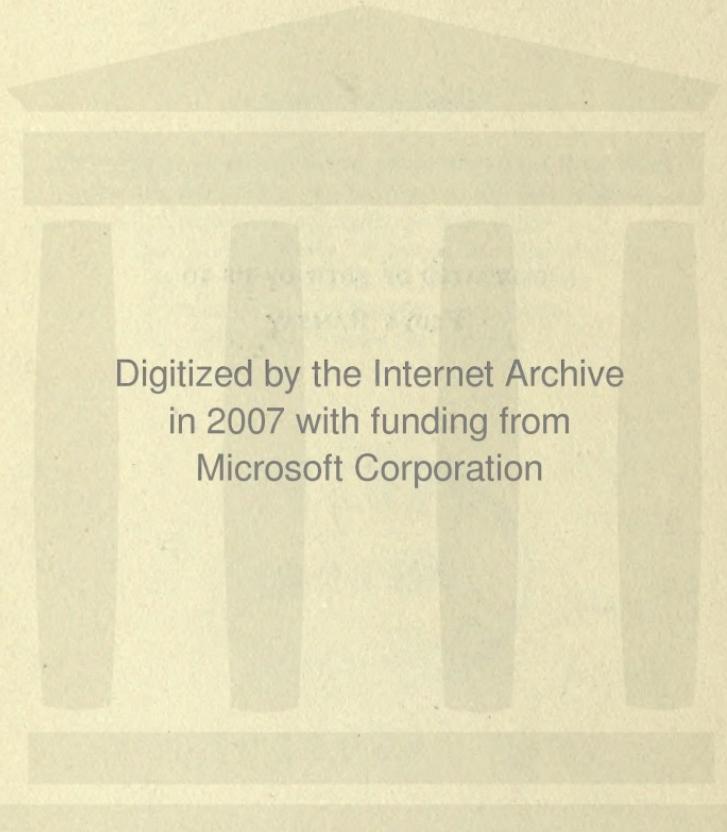
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A FOREWORD

It is hard for me to realize that this is a first volume of verse. Most of the initial ventures that have passed under my jaundiced eye have been precisely what such early collections are expected to be. They were, as Wilde expressed it somewhere, "promissory notes—that are never met." . . . But though it is hard for me to believe that this is a first book, it is still harder for me to believe that this is Maxwell Bodenheim's first book. In these days of the much advertised "poetic renaissance," when the *Dial* out-radicals the *Little Review*, and even the New York *Tribune* prints *vers-libre* on its editorial page, I expected to see nothing less than Bodenheim's Collected works. . . . This pleasure will evidently have to be deferred. . . . Meanwhile, here is an indication, and no slight one, of how distinguished and decorative that collection will be. Without Kreymborg's caustic and acerb irony, or Johns' fluent lyricism, Bodenheim has something that neither they nor, for that matter, any of his colleagues in "*Others*" possess. I refer to his extreme sensitivity to words. Words, under his hands, have unexpected growths; placid nouns and sober adjectives bear fantastic fruit. It is a strange and often magic potion he brews from them; dark and fiery liquids that he pours into curiously designed cups. Sometimes he gets drunk with his own distillation, and reels between preciousness and incoherence. Sometimes the mixture is so strong that even his metaphors, crowding about each other, become inextricably mixed. But as a rule, Bodenheim is as clear-

headed as he is colorful. Among the younger men he has no superior in his use of the verbal *nuance*.

But it is not merely as word-juggler that Bodenheim shines. He has an imagination that he uses both as a tool and as a toy. Personally, I care more for Bodenheim when he plays with his images (as in "Poet to His Love," "Hill Side Tree" and certain of the poems to "Minna"), than when his figures attempt to build or destroy something (as in "To An Enemy," "The Interne," "Soldiers"). It is as a decorator that his gifts serve him best. Even such an intimate picture as "Factory Girl" is saved from mawkishness by his delicate sense of design. The composition in which Death is seen as

" . . . a black slave with little silver birds
Perched in a sleeping wreath upon his head"

has a quality that suggests the Beardsley of "Under the Hill." In the realm of the whimsical-grotesque, Bodenheim walks with a light but sure footstep.

There are doubtless other things—sharper and more important—in the following poems that will attract many. But the ones that I have found seem to have a quiet, unofficial, dignity of their own. Others may ask for more. For me, they are sufficient.

LOUIS UNTERMEYER.

M I N N A

I

Twilight pushes down your eyes
With shimmering, pregnant fingers
That leave you covered with still-born touch.
With little whips of dead words
Silence cuts your lips to a keener red.
Your heart strikes its bed of dark mirth, in death,
And your hands lie over it, guarding the corpse.
Night will soon whisk away this room
But you are already invisible.

II

Your cheeks are spent diminuendos
Sheering into the rose-veiled silence of your lips.
Your eyes are gossamer coquettes
Ringed with the sparkling breath of dead loves.
Your body strays into lanterns of form
Strewing the night within this room. . . .
The light dies; you are still
And spill the frolicing night of your heart
Over the darkness about you, making it pale.

III

Your criss-crossed ringlets of hair
Are tipped with faltering opalescence.
At dawn a lost smile ever returns
And hides in your hair because he fears
The solemn marble profile of your face.
His presence caresses your lips to wings of color
That beat against each other and release
Dulcet, feathery tinges of love descending to your heart.
And thus, each morning, your rising heart
Wears a new bridal robe.

IV

Moonlight bends over black silence,
Making it bloom to wild-flowers of sound
That only green things can hear.
A wind sprawls over an orchard,
Frightening its silent litany to sound.
A thread of star-light has fallen to this tree
And curls among its leaves, tangling them to silence. . . .
Standing amidst these things, Beloved,
We feel the words our hearts cannot form.

V

Pain is a country cousin of yours.
He flings buds of awakening desires
Upon the stately weddings in your heart,
And laughs.
You must teach him better manners ;
Bind his mouth with pale sleep ;
Caress him with trailing hands
That loosen the buds he has stolen, into flowers.

VI

We met upon nearby hill-tops of our lives
And shook the dust from us, revealing flame-laced clothes
And eyeing each other in the same moment.
You curved a longing to the wave of your arm :
A longing for dark rest crossed by unbidden gifts.
And my eyes deepened in answer. . . .
Then we floated down to the valley between us :
The valley ringed with smooth honey-combs of sleep.

VII

You have a morning-glory face
Whose edges are sensitive to light
And curl in beneath the burden of a smile.
Remembered silence returns to the morning-glory
And lattices its curves
With shades of golden reverberations.
Then the morning-glory's heart careens to loves
Whose scent beats on the sky-walls of your soul.

VIII

You draw my heart about you, as a cloak,
And your words steal over it like a reluctant color:
A color of pain that fears to die.
My heart ripples with your slight turning
But sometimes moves when you are still,
Beckoning to longings that have not reached your mouth.

IX

Sedate and archaic, a twilight-frilled haze
Walks over the meadows like rolled-out centuries
Quivering in sprightly welcome.
Trees pushed down by silence;
Trees lolling in comely abandon;
Trees pungently flamboyant,
Their leaves spinning in the wind's golden elusiveness.
Trees probing the shrilly sensitive sunset
Like little, laced nightmares leaning
Upon a scarlet breast;
Trees sprinkling their stifled mockery
Upon the blue tomb of the air;
Trees, are you silenced beings
Whitening into the winding paradise
Of old loves seeking a second death?
And has this archaic, twilight-frilled haze
Moulded me to your semblance?

X

The wrinkled grimaces of eastern skies
Are caught on the Chinese mirrors of your eyes
And lie, pallid and benign.
Your mouth is a senile dragon
Spitting fire-fly words from its vermillion shroud.
Your cheeks are shrunken silences of Gods
Paling out upon ivoried Nirvanas of silk.
Your face holds fugitive bits of your heart
That wandered away and returned to rest.

XI

Your body was puzzling, like a half-made figure
Till the final shaping of your voice came
And riotous secrets of lines curved out
And trembled upon your limbs.
Then silence touched your body to motion :
Your limbs released fleeing andantes of pain
And your heart flung little crescents of budding caresses
Into the waiting hunger of your eyes.

XII

You are a well sprayed with cool rubies of sound
In which I bathe and rise with another skin
Like moon-stone passion slyly courting
The light breath of a tired dream.
I drop my heart into the depths
Of your disheveled serenity,
And stroll off empty.
When my heart has merged to your shades of pearl
quietness
I return and once more drop within you.

XIII

The mellow anger of his hair
Disputes his sleepy girl's face.
His robe glows like a painted wound
Upon the bent meditation of his body.
His hands are so thin that silence bruises them :
Thin from the pressure brought by endless prayers. . .
When you were with me I did not know
That your voice was pouring him out in molten colors
To be shaped by the fingers of my memory—
This prince-made-of-many-deal-loves.

XIV

Sometimes jaded, sometimes tranquil,
Your eyes invade the tumult of your face.
Your lips are the remnants of a love
That made a sunset-cup of your face.
The movements of your body
Caress the couch you sit on into sound
That seems to answer your words.
You are restless because upon this couch
The cold touch of your lover lies
And seeps into you, reaching your heart.

XV

Your arms, in faltering crescendos,
Wander through the room
Tinted with expectation of night.
The room seems a tottering tomb
Through which you roam with hands
Striving to press each form into the shape
Of someone buried beneath you. . . .
Only when night sprays the room with his breath
Do you change to that which you seek.

XVI

Two walls, dizzy with rain-touch
And suffused with gauzily amorous sunlight,
Creep over a hill and meet.
And so our foreheads touch.

Silence between our hands grows into clasped music
Sprinkling our finger-tips with attenuated chords of touch.
Our hearts weave low songs to this accompaniment:
So low that even silence cannot hear.

XVII

Afternoon sunlight limps tenuously away,
Leaving a snarled retrospect of golden foot-marks.
The sea is pregnant with gracious discords
That falteringly shroud the sleep-rhythmed breasts of
winds.
The sky is a genially vacant stare.
Remaining touches of starlight
Tremble the leaves when air is still. . . .
And so my love for you strolls through this day,
Picking up forgotten hints of its heart.

XVIII

Maiden

My heart is a slovenly russet peasant-girl
Flirting with staidly immaculate swains.

Youth

And mine is summer-rain
Strewing itself in mirthful swirls
Over the odorous pain of flowers
That long to dance.

Maiden

My heart will walk through yours,
Holding its crushed robe in both hands
And quieting, with gentle nakedness,
The mirthful rain and odorous pain in your heart.

Youth

When your heart leaves mine it will be an old woman
With two of my shrunken flowers for her breasts.

XIX

Your breast is the bridal-couch of our stillness.
The restless beggar of our breath
Leaves the folding of stillness, reeling with gifts,
With dreams in which we glimpse our own scars.
We give these reflections of scars to stillness
And she turns them into bitter hummingbirds
Offering us the colored death of song
Held out in her enticing hands.

XX

Like prayers born dead, long shadows
Strew the floor and clutch at your feet,
But buoyant with paint you walk to and fro.
The room is garlanded with unseen eyes
That you must evade lest they touch you into sight
And send you, naked, into the moonlight.

XXI

Your body is a closed fan
Holding long brush-strokes of glowing repose.
Your words clumsily unloosen the fan
And it dips to the rustling birth of forgotten doubts.
Your soul bears the fan lightly in his hand
And waves to the mirror his blind eyes cannot touch.

XXII

The gown you wear is curiously like sound—
Tangles of dahlia-murmurs taking shape
In shrinking, mellow sprays.
The everlasting journey of your heart
Gliding over a sleepy litany
That winds through scattered star-flowers of regrets:
The everlasting journey of your heart
Is like a fragile traveler of sound—
A murmur seeking the love that gave it birth.

XXIII

Whenever a love dies within you,
Griefs, phosphorescent with unborn tears,
Cut the glowing hush of a meadow within you:
Griefs striking their pearl-voiced cymbals
And shaping the silences once held by your love.
Your new love blows a trumpet of sunlight
Into the meadow, and your griefs
Leap into the echo and return to you.

XXIV

We blew a luminous confusion of thoughts
Upon the silence of our souls,
Staining it to little, weeping tints.
Our hands pressed serpentine pain into each other
And stroked it away to twilights of relief.
Our lips shook before the tread of coming words,
But closed again, finding no need for them.

XXV

Upon an arched sarcophagus of pain
Are figures painted in arrested embraces
With outlines so light that we must bend close to see:
Old loves almost merging to one tone
Of pale regret that holds
An inner glow of dead weeping.
Our lips cling and our breath winds to a hand
With touch like summer rain
Blending the arrested figures upon the arched sarco-
phagus of pain.

XXVI

Make of your voice, a dawn
Dropping little gestures upon my forehead,
While slumber-edged thoughts rise in my head
And wave back greetings droll and confused.
Pain has jested with the whirling night
And both vanish like an untold prayer,
So, make of your voice, a dawn
Dropping little gestures upon my forehead.

XXVII

Your mind is a little, clandestine pastel
Shaped into a posture of rigid grief.
Its colors huddle together
And make a stunted, aching lyric. . . .
Ah frail-flowered moment preceding reality—
Your eyelids open; the little pastel dies.

M Y S E L F

POET TO HIS LOVE

An old silver church in a forest
Is my love for you.
The trees around it
Are words that I have stolen from your heart.
An old silver bell, the last smile you gave,
Hangs at the top of my church.
It rings only when you come through the forest
And stand beside it.
And then, it has no need for ringing,
For your voice takes its place.

DEATH

I shall walk down the road.
I shall turn and feel upon my feet
The kisses of Death, like scented rain.
For Death is a black slave with little silver birds
Perched in a sleeping wreath upon his head.
He will tell me, his voice like jewels
Dropped into a satin bag,
How he has tip-toed after me down the road,
His heart made a dark whirlpool with longing for me.
Then he will graze me with his hands
And I shall be one of the sleeping, silver birds
Between the cold waves of his hair, as he tip-toes on.

TO GEORGIE MAY

The ruins of your face were twined with youth.
Vines of starlight questioned your face when you smiled.
Your eyes dissolved over distances
And steeped the graves of many loves.
Night was kind to your body:
The careless vehemence of curves
Softened beneath your darkly-loosened dress.
And your heart toyed with an emotion
That left you vague hunger poised over death.

POET-VAGABOND GROWN OLD

The dust of many roads has been my grey wine.
Surprised beech-trees have bowed
With me, to the plodding morning
Humming tunes frail as webs of dead perfume,
To his love in golden silks, the departed moon.
Maidens like rose-flooded statues
Have bathed me in the wine of their silence.

But now I walk on, alone.
And only after watching many evenings,
Do I dance a bit with dying wisps of moon-light,
To persuade myself that I am young.

BLIND

Blinder than oak-trees in the wind
Endlessly weaving sighs into a poem
To sight,
He sits, the light of one pale purple lantern
Seeping into his dream-hollowed face,
Like floating, transparent words
Pale with unuttered meanings.
He mends a flute and sighs as though
Its shadow leaned heavily upon his heart
And told him things his dead eyes could not grasp.

LOVE

You seemed a caryatid melting
Into the wind-blown, dark blue temple of the sky.
But you bent down as I came closer, breaking the image.
When I passed, you raised your head
And blew the little feather of a smile upon me.
I caught it on open lips and blew it back.
And in that moment we loved,
Although you stood still waiting for your lover,
And I walked on to my love.

HILL-SIDE TREE

Like a drowsy, rain-browned saint,
You squat, and sometimes your voice
In which the wind takes no part,
Is like mists of music wedding each other.
A drunken, odor-laced peddler is the morning wind.
He brings you golden-scarfed cities
Whose voices are swirls of bells burdened with summer ;
And maidens whose hearts are galloping princes.
And you raise your branches to the sky,
With a whisper that holds the smile you cannot shape.

INTRUSION

The lilies sag with rain-drops:

Their petals hold fire that does not break out.

(As though it slept between vapor-silk

It could not burn).

And a young breeze stumbles upon the lilies

And strokes them with his spinning hands. . . .

The lilies and the young breeze are not unlike

Your silence and the rush of soft words breaking it.

CHANGE

I came upon a maiden
Blowing rose petals in the air
And catching them, as they fell,
Upon quick fingertips
Her laugh fell lighter than the petals
And dropped little gestures upon my forehead.
I gave her sadness and she blew it up
As she had blown the rose petals:
And it almost seemed joy as her fingers caught it.
But I was only a wanderer plaited with dust,
Who gave her new petals to play with.

PORTRAITS

I

You were in the room, yet your body
Was stone cut in drooping lines
And hued with decorous puzzling pinks and browns.
Even your hair seemed an elfin wig
Carelessly thrown upon your stone head.
And your eyes were hollows cradling broken shadows.
When you spoke your body did not change:
It was as though a flock of sleepy birds
Had issued from your stone mouth.

II

Vague words tapered off to pale weariness,
And sunlight was night smiling in his sleep.
Your hands moved as though they sought a dying
emotion:
Your lips, drawn back, seemed evading sound.
When twilight fell upon us,
Like night striving to forget his dream,
We had long since passed out of the room.

MEETING

A mood whose heart was a flagon of ashes,
Met another mood whose lips were stained
With the odors of sleeping wine-songs.
The second mood kissed the breast of the first
And filled the ashen flagon with his pale purple breath.
Then the two moods died, and he who bore them,
Being an old man, sat down to make others.

~COTTON-PICKER

Like the arms of a child lifting shining white lilies from
a little brown pond,

Sunlight drew songs from this lithe, grimacing negress
Whose skin was smoother than the cloudless sky above
her.

The flecks of cotton they picked brought a changing
white stupor

To the negroes about her, but she swung down her row,
With broad smiles cutting her pent-up satin face.

And though the afternoon slowly pressed down her back,
She never ceased humming to her joyous Christ.

FRIENDSHIP

Grey, drooping-shouldered bushes scrape the edges
Of bending swirls of yellow-white flowers.
So do my thoughts meet the wind-scattered color of you.

A green-shadowed trance of water
Is splintered to little, white tasseled awakenings
By the beat of long, black oars.
So do my thoughts enter yours.

Split, brown-blue clouds press into each other
Over hills dressed in mute, clinging haze.
So do my thoughts slowly form
Over the draped mystery of you.

FACTORY GIRL

Why are your eyes like dry brown flower-pods,
Still, gripped by the memory of lost petals?
I feel that if I touched them
They would crumble to falling brown dust
And you would stand with blindness revealed.
Yet, you would not shrink, for your life
Has been long since memorized,
And eyes would only melt out against its high walls.
Besides, in the making of boxes
Sprinkled with crude forget-me-nots,
One is curiously blessed if ones eyes are dead.

DEATH

I

A fan of smoke in the long, green-white revery of the sky,
Slowly curls apart.
So shall we rise and widen out in the silence of air.

II

An old man runs down a little yellow road
To an out-flung, white thicket uncovered by morning.
So shall I swing to the white sharpness of death.

INTERLUDE

Sun-light recedes on the mountains, in long gold shafts,
Like the falling pillars of a temple.
Then singing silence almost too nimble for ears:
The mountain-tenors fling their broad voices
Into the blue hall of the sky,
And through a rigid column of these voices
Night dumbly walks.
Night, crushing sound between his fingers
Until it forms a lightly frozen couch
On which he dreams.

CHORUS GIRL

Her voice was like rose-fragrance waltzing in the wind.
She seemed a shadow stained with shadow colors
Swinging through waves of sunlight.
Perhaps her heart was an old minstrel
Sleepily pawing at his little mandolin.

OLD AGE

In me is a little painted square
Bordered by old shops, with gaudy awnings.
And before the shops sit smoking, open-bloused old men,
Drinking sunlight.
The old men are my thoughts:
And I come to them each evening, in a creaking cart,
And quietly unload supplies.
We fill slim pipes and chat,
And inhale scents from pale flowers in the center of the
square. . . .
Strong men, tinkling women, and dripping, squealing
children
Stroll past us, or into the shops.
They greet the shopkeepers, and touch their hats or fore-
heads to me. . . .
Some evening I shall not return to my people.

TO ONE DEAD

I walked upon a hill
And the wind, made solemnly drunk with your presence,
Reeled against me.
I stooped to question a flower,
And you floated between my fingers and the petals,
Tying them together.
I severed a leaf from its tree
And a water-drop in the green flagon
Cupped a hunted bit of your smile.
All things about me were steeped in your remembrance
And shivering as they tried to tell me of it.

TO A DISCARDED STEEL RAIL

Straight strength pitched into the surliness of the ditch:
A soul you have—strength has always delicate, secret
reasons.

Your soul is a dull question.

I do not care for your strength, but your stiff smile at
Time:

A smile which men call rust.

TO AN ENEMY

I despise my friends more than you.
I would have known myself but they stood before the
 mirrors
And painted on them images of the virtues I craved.
You came with sharpest chisel, scraping away the false
 paint.
Then I knew and detested myself, but not you,
For glimpses of you in the glasses you uncovered
Showed me the virtues whose images you destroyed.

SOLDIERS

The smile of one face is like a fierce mermaid
Floating dead in a little pale-brown pond.

The lips of one are twisted
To a hieroglyphic of silence.

The face of another is like a shining frog.

Another face is met by a question
That digs into it like sudden claws.

Beside it is a face like a mirror
In which a stiffened child dangles. . .

Dead soldiers, in a sprawling crescent,
Whose faces form a gravely mocking sentence.

FORGETFULNESS

Happier than green-kirtled apple-trees
Waving their soft-rimmed fans of light
And taking the morning mist, in quick breaths,
You sit in the woven meditation and surprise
Of a morning uncovering its wind-wreathed head.
And yet within the light stillness of your soul
Dream-heavy guards sleep uneasily
Over the body of your last slain sorrow.

THE INTERNE

O the agony of having too much power!
In my passive palm are hundreds of lives.
Strange alchemy, they drain my blood.

My heart becomes iron; my brain copper; my eyes silver;
my lips brass.
Merely by twitching a supple finger, I twirl lives from me,
Strong-winged or fluttering and broken.
They are my children: I am their mother and father.
I watch them live and die.

REAR PORCHES OF AN APARTMENT BUILDING

A sky that has never known sun, moon, or stars,
A sky that is like a dead, kind face
Would have the color of your eyes,
O servant-girl singing of pear-trees in the sun
And scraping the yellow fruit you once picked
When your lavender-white eyes were alive.
On the porch above you sit two women
With faces the color of dry brown earth;
They knit grey rosettes and nibble cakes.
And on the porch above them are three children
Gravely kissing each other's foreheads,
And an ample nurse with a huge red fan. . . .
The death of the afternoon to them
Is but the lengthening of blue-black shadows on brick
walls.

TO ONE DEAD

Shaking nights, noons tame and dust-quiet, and wind-
broken days
Were hands modelling your face.
Yet people glanced at you and pass on.

And now they speak of you,
Quickly weighing tiny, stray chips of you:
They who did not know you.

THE MASTER-POSNER

MAXWELL BODENHEIM and BEN HECHT

THE MASTER-POISONER

PEOPLE

| | |
|------------------|---------------|
| Sobe | The Poisoner |
| Fana | His Wife |
| Maldor | His Assistant |

The Poisoner's living-room. Purple velvet draperies embroidered with huge lavender and orange lilies hang over the rear wall, completely covering it. One great scarlet cushion, four feet high and five feet wide, stands at the center of the wall against the draperies. The right and left walls have two small, narrow windows near the top, through which a dimly glowing light pours, forming a triangle as it strikes the floor. A narrow tall entrance blocked by orange-colored portieres stands in the center of the right and left walls. The floor is black and uncovered. A huge black candle three inches wide and five feet high emerges from a black urn in the center of the floor, bisecting the triangle formed by the two streams of pale light. White and scarlet cushions are scattered about the floor. On two of these cushions sit Sobe, the Poisoner, and Maldor, his Assistant. They sit to the left and right of the candle, eyeing each other with a softly-smiling melancholy. Sobe is tall, black-bearded, condor-faced, and clad in an orange robe, and black sandals. Maldor is short and smooth-shaven, with the face of a sleepy girl. He wears a white robe and sandals.

Maldor (*puzzled and wistful, speaks softly to the Poisoner*)

A secretion from the intestines of the cane-rat found in the Hwang-Ho river, sprinkled with the pollen of jasmine-flowers, produces a most wonderful poison, O Master. When droppep into the eyes of a virgin, this poison will cause her face to contract in a twitching crescendo.

Sobe (*speaks listlessly*)

The eyes of a virgin are too blank for a poisoner's relish.

Maldor (*speaks with eager, hopeful emphasis*)

The virgin, O Master, provides only the unimportant tinge to the process. The relish lies in the pompous complexity of the poison.

Sobe

Complexity is but a shattered mirror.

Maldor (*still hopefully*)

From the iridescent dimples of the Medusae fish I have extracted a saffron liquid, O master, which mixed with the larvae of dragon-flies, completes a most satisfactory poison. Administered in microscopic doses, it creates ribbons of flame in the blood and its enchanting victim expires, glowing with strange, phosphorescent colors.

Sobe

I am sick of suavely terrifying poisons.

Maldor (*speaks wistfully*)

What strange delicacy makes you almost brutal to-night, O Master?

Sobe (*speaks as to himself*)

Wearisome poisons. A droll flutter . . . and then always that dainty monotony—death.

Maldor (*speaks swiftly*)

But surely our work still holds you, O Master. You have not become reconciled to the empty ferocity of death!

Sobe (*speaks gently*)

Ah, Maldor, our poisons lend their little flourishes merely to life. I would like to poison death.

Maldor (*speaks aggrievedly*)

But master, those cringing writhings, those indelicate squirmings and jocund acrobatics which our most fastidious poisons produce—what more tender satisfaction!

Sobe (*listlessly*)

They are but interludes leaving me languidly envious of death, my master.

Maldor (*speaks with indignation*)

You have no master! Your last poison of moth-blood produced an effect so exquisitely monstrous that even death was appalled. Ah, the bones of an old woman, dissolving within her, left her body, a loose grimace.

Sobe

I am sick of all these sterile grimaces.

Maldor (*speaks slowly*)

Some new and lethal poem has sighed itself into your heart.

Sobe (*softly*)

There are no poisons remaining. We have signalled

death with many diverting gestures. We have fitted too many clownish shrouds.

Maldor

You are wistfully nervous. Some dream has burned your heart to an ashen bag.

Sobe

I will tell you, Maldor, what I have done.

Maldor

Surely, you have found no last contortion for life.

Sobe

I have found the ultimate contortion.

Maldor

Some nibbling horror. . . .

Sobe

No, Beauty.

Maldor (*after a pause*)

Beware, master, beauty is life's revenge upon death.

Sobe

You know very little. Beauty is the devourer of death.

Maldor (*speaks slowly*)

What poison is this?

Sobe (*speaks gently*)

A drop taken into the blood, no more. The skin becomes a milk-tinted pond in which wine-ghosts timidly bathe. The eyes, like purple breasted birds, beat against the day. The mouth blooms into splendours. Ah, Maldor, the drop releases beauty from her thousand prisons. The victim stands washed in a flood of light before which imagination dies.

Maldor (*speaks maliciously*)

What unique philanthropy is this? Has Sobe the

Poisoner dreamed of immortality?

Sobe (*gently*)

Sobe the Poisoner has made a drop of poison which will create beauty and death. In the soul of its victim these two monsters meet and strive against each other. Immortal beauty and death remain clutched in a stifling caress. The poison, as it works upon its victim, renders her more radiant and beautiful each moment, and each moment it paralyses her heart.

Maldor

And then what happens?

Sobe

Bereft of life, but with a beauty which must resist death, the tortured one remains my own. Thus with my poison I become death's master. Thus that which should die, does not die. Thus death advancing creates a flame which it cannot stifle.

Maldor

Beware.

Sobe (*speaks with quickened emphasis*)

Death is my slave. I summon him. I open a jewelled gate which he cannot pass.

Maldor (*speaks softly*)

I do not like this poison.

Sobe (*who smiles*)

You are an amateur of death, Maldor.

Maldor (*softly*)

I do not like this poison.

Sobe

I will tell you another virtue of this poison, which perhaps will entice your fears.

Maldor

What is this virtue?

Sobe

Other poisons I have made provided us only with that little frenzied prelude to death. Our victims have amused us somewhat, with unconscious heavings—little, docile marionettes in the torments of poisons. But now, Maldor, our subject, inspired by the ever-increasing loveliness of her body, by the ever-growing flame of her beauty, resists in a torment beyond those instinctive spasms and dimly-felt agonies. Her overwhelming desire to prolong her beauty makes the struggle against death wondrously hideous.

Maldor

But since you say she cannot die, where will those struggles lead her?

Sobe

I do not know. I know only that a woman whose beauty feeds upon the shadows of death, must amuse us with a miracle.

Maldor (*softly*)

The virtue of this poison does not appeal to me. The miracle you promise is cluttered with subtle doubts. Death, betrayed, may blindly wander. Let us rather return to our pathetically certain poisons and revel in the final froth-sprinkled caperings of life. Ah, the powdered hair of the white caterpillar, steeped in moon-light, will cause the eyes to swell out of their sockets, and the tongue to burst.

Sobe (*gently*)

Where is Fana?

Maldor

Fana!

Sobe

Summon Fana to me.

Maldor

Master, do not summon Fana.

Sobe

I shall make Fana beautiful

(*Fana draws aside the portieres at the left. Fana is tall, with a majestic ugliness. She is dressed in a dark brown robe. Her face is swathed in a pale brown veil, knotted at the nape of the neck, and falling almost to her feet. She stands motionless. The two men turn and stare at her.*)

Sobe (*softly*)

I shall bring the poison.

(*He rises and departs through the right entrance.*

Maldor rises and continues to look steadily at Fana.)

Fana (*gently*)

I heard the word beauty.

Maldor

What else did you hear?

Fana

I heard only the word beauty.

Maldor

The master is evil tonight.

Fana

More evil than always?

Maldor

Even more.

Fana

What does he do?

Maldor

He frightens me with a mockery of death.

Fana

What did he say of beauty?

Maldor

Fana, go before he returns.

(*Maldor quickly walks to the right entrance, draws aside the portieres, and peers cautiously out. He returns quickly to Fana.*)

Maldor (*speaking quickly*)

He has a poison to make you beautiful.

Fana

Ah!

Maldor

Go!

Fana

Is he weary of my ugliness?

Maldor

No. He has no thought for you. He seeks to enslave his master, Death.

Fana

But I did hear him speak of beauty.

Maldor (*desperately*)

He means to make you the flowered tomb of beauty.
I can tell you no more. Go!

Fana

Why do you tell me this? I have seen you smile upon things less subtle than tombs.

Maldor

I love you.

Fana

It is easy to love that which is veiled. But perhaps you love me because my face is so gentle a poison.

Maldor

I know not ugliness. It is a mood which has forsaken me. I plead with you to go.

(*Maldor hears Sobe's footfalls and seats himself impassively upon his cushion.*)

Fana (*softly*)

I shall remain.

(*Sobe enters. He bows to Fana.*)

Sobe

Ah, Fana, I shall make your stay pleasant.

Fana—

Yes, Master.

(*She seats herself behind the candle between Sobe and Maldor.*)

Sobe (*gently*)—

You are very ugly, Fana. You wear a veil because you are ugly.

Fana—

I heard you speak of beauty.

Sobe—

Your body is like a broken cloud. Your face is like a pottery that crumbles in the light. You are not beautiful.

Fana (*softly*)—

Why do you tell me this so carefully?

Sobe—

To make you dream.

Fana—

Dreams are mirrors in which I do not care to look.

Sobe—

I have a poison that will open your hearts to dreams.

Fana—

The dream which poison brings is too long.

Sobe—

This poison brings two dreams. One of beauty and one of death. Would you listen to them?

Fana—

Listening to dreams one avoids the dreariness of sleep.

Sobe (gently)—

You are very ugly, Fana. I have a poison which will make you beautiful.

Fana—

To lie beautiful in death is a lyric privilege, but so faint an echo.

Sobe—

You reason too simply. I cannot promise you life. Perhaps your pleasure will be only that of one who greets a phantom lover. A moment of loveliness and the thought of eternal beauty embalmed in a dark dream, may be all that shall be given to you before death.

Fana

And what else is possible? \

Sobe

It is possible that you will become so beautiful that you cannot die. It is possible that Death, feeding your

beauty, will exhaust itself in a last gentle caress. Then you will still live, and Death, a eunuch, will drag himself after you.

Fana

But why do you speak so eagerly? Surely your only interest does not lie in my exchanging one veil for another.

Maldor (*breaking his silence softly*)

No, Fana, my master dreams of edged subtleties.

Sobe

Make them simple with your telling, Maldor.

Maldor

My master is weary of ordinary effects. He has watched too many frenzied struggles. No longer do they intrigue him. He yearns for something elaborate. He has dreamed of more fragile tortures. The poison he will give you brings no pain, but the beauty it creates within you will sharpen to madness your desire to live, and my master will sit and look into your eyes.

Sobe

Have you finished, Maldor?

Maldor

Yes.

Sobe (*gently*)

I desire another assistant, Fana. As you see, one who will serve me more faithfully, and whose loves are not so obvious. I will tell you why I am so eager. I wish simply to master death.

Fana

Have you the poison?

Sobe

Here.

(*He takes from his robe a small flagon and hands it to her.*)

Sobe

I have hidden the drop in wine.

(*Fana rises and lifts her veil from her mouth. She drinks, smiling at Maldor, who sits and stares impassively ahead of him. Sobe rises and moves to the back of the room, watching her.*)

Fana

I have drunk.

Sobe (*softly*)

Unveil yourself.

(*Fana unveils herself.*)

Sobe

Ah!

(*He draws aside a panel portiere in the rear draperies, and a long narrow mirror is revealed.*)

Sobe

Look.

Fana

Ah!

Sobe (*gazing at her intently*)

You are beautiful.

Fana (*whispering*)

I grow more beautiful.

Sobe (*he speaks as if growing dazed*)

Your eyes. . . .

Fana

My eyes are like madly swinging torches.

Sobe

Your mouth. . . .

Fana

My mouth is like the little red door to a palace.

Sobe

Your hair. . . .

Fana (*eyeing the mirror still*)

My hair is like a misty pageant.

Sobe

Your body. . . .

Fana

The wine of my body drenches my clothes.

Sobe

You grow more beautiful.

Fana (*becomes exultant*)

My beauty gathers over me like rose-flooded armor.

Sobe (*whispering*)

Death slashes at your armor.

Fana (*exultant*)

I cannot die.

Sobe

The poison glides softly through your blood.

Fana (*she speaks softly*)

I cannot die.

(*She turns and looks at him.*)

Sobe (*shrinking back*)

Do not look upon me.

(*Fana flings out both her arms and moves toward him.*

She speaks in a strange voice.)

Fana

What pleasures do you see in my eyes?

Sobe (*gasping*)

The poison . . . take it away. . . .
Fana (*she sings*)

My beauty, my beauty is a wildly chanting torrent.
Sobe (*speaks and holds his throat and gasps*)

Death staggers from you . . . and death blindly wanders. . . .

Fana (*comes closer to him and speaks mockingly*)

Ah, poisoner.

Sobe (*in anguish*)

My heart breaks. (*He staggers; speaks faintly.*) I am Death's master!

(*He staggers another step forward and pitches headlong across the scarlet cushion on which he sat. Maldor leans forward and touches his throat as Fana softly laughs.*)

Maldor

He is dead.

(*Maldor straightens himself and stares impassively ahead of him. Fana remains an instant staring at herself in the mirror, then turns, and with an enigmatic smile, passes out of the room.*)

[Curtain]

P O E T ' S H E A R T

POET'S HEART

PEOPLE

The Mad Shepherd
The Narcissus Peddler
The Slender Nun
The Wine Jar Maiden
The Poet

A great window of palest purple light. The lower corner of the window is visible. A dark purple wall frames the window, and narrow rectangles of the wall, below and to the left of the window-corner, are visible. Before the window corner is the portion of a pale pink floor. One tall thin white candle stands against the dark purple rectangle of wall to the left of the window-corner. It bears a narrow flame which remains stationary. Soft and clear light pours in from the window-corner and dim shapes stand behind it. The Mad Shepherd appears from the left. He holds a reed to his lips, but does not blow into it. A long brown cloak drapes him: black sandals are on his feet. His black hair caresses his shoulders; his face is young. He pauses, three-fourths of his body framed by the palest purple window-corner.
The Mad Shepherd (addressing the palest purple window-corner)

I've lost a tune. It's a spirit-rose, and a reed-limbed boy ran before me and whisked it past my ears before

I could seize him. Have you seen him, window clearer than the clashing light-bubbles in a woman's eyes? (*A pause.*) I sat on a rock in the midst of my sheep and smiled at the piping of my young soul, as it climbed a spirit-tree. Soon it would whirl joyously on the tip of the tree, and my heart would turn with it. Then the song brushed past me and made my head a burning feather dropping down. I stumbled after it, over the sun-dazed hills, and the reed-limbed boy would often stop, touch both of my eyes with the song-flower, and spring away. I saw him dance into this black palace. I followed, through high corridors, to you, palest purple window, towering over me like a silent mass of breath-clear souls. He has gone. Palest purple window, tell me where he is?

(*There is a short silence. The Mad Shepherd stands despairingly fingering his reed. The Narcissus Peddler appears from the right. He is an old man, a huge basket of cut narcissus strapped to his back. His body is tall and slender; his face a bit yellow, with a long silver-brown beard. His head is bare. He wears a black velvet coat, pale yellow shirt, soft grey, loose trousers, and black sandals. He rests his basket upon the floor. The Mad Shepherd takes a step toward him, wearily.*)

The Narcissus Peddler

A Voice walked into me, one day. How he found me, sleeping between two huge purple hills, I do not know. He said with a laugh that had ghosts of weeping in it that he knew a garden where narcissus flowers grew taller than myself. What was there to do?—my soul and I, we had to walk with him. He led us to this palace,

spinning the thread of a laugh behind him so that we could follow. But now he has gone, and there is no garden—only a palest purple window.

The Mad Shepherd

We can leap through this window, but it may be a trap.

The Narcissus Peddler

Or a dream?

The Mad Shepherd

Perhaps this is a dream that is true—an endless dream.

The Narcissus Peddler

Can that be death?

Mad Shepherd (*pointing to the other's basket*)

With death, you would have left your narcissus behind you, for fragrance itself.

Peddler

If my life has melted to an endless dream, my chase is over. I shall sit here and my soul will become an endless thought of narcissus.

(*He seats himself beside his basket; Shepherd stands despairingly; the Slender Nun appears from the right: She is small and her body like a thin drooping stem; she wears the black dress of a nun but her child face is uncovered. Her feet are bare. She stops, standing a step away from the Peddler.*)

The Slender Nun

I see a candle that is like an arm stiffened in prayer. (*She pauses.*) Palest purple window, is my soul standing behind you and spreading to light that gently thrusts me down? A flamed-loosed angel lifted it from me. I ran after him. He seemed to touch you, window, like a vapor kiss dying upon pale purple silk. (*A pause.*)

Must I stand here always waiting for my soul, like a flower petal pressed deep into the earth by passing feet?

The Shepherd

You have lost a soul and I a tune. Let me make you the tune and you make me your soul. You could sit with me on my rock in the hills and make a soul of my reed-rippling, and, piping of you, I might weave a new tune.

The Nun

Can you give me a soul that will be Christ floating out in clear music? Only then I would go with you.

Shepherd (*sadly*)

My music is like the wet, quick kiss of rain. It knows nothing of Christ.

(*A short silence.*)

(*The Wine-Jar Maiden appears from the right. She is tall and pale brown; upon her head is a long pale green jar; her hair is black and spouts down. Her face is wide but delicately twisted. She wears a thin simple pale green gown, with a black girdle about her waist, one tasseled end hanging down. She stops a little behind the Slender Nun, and lowers her wine-jar to the floor. The Nun turns and partly faces her. The Narcissus Peddler looks up from where he has sat, in a reverie, beside his basket.*)

The Wine-Jar Maiden

My heart was a wine jar stained with the roses of frail dreams and filled with wine that had turned to shaking, purple mist. One day I felt it wrenched from me, and mist-drops that flew from it, as it left, sank into my breast and made me shrink. I could not see the thief, but I followed the scent of my heart trailing behind

him. It brought me here ; but at this palest purple window it died. Scent of my heart, have you spread over this huge window, and must I stand forever looking upon you?

(The Narcissus Peddler slowly rises and takes a stride toward the palest purple window.)

The Narcissus Peddler

That dim shape behind the window—I believe it is a huge narcissus. I am a rainbow-smeared knave to stand here juggling little golden balls of dreams. I shall spring through the window.

The Slender Nun

Take my hand when you spring. Perhaps this is God's forehead, and we shall melt into it, like billows of rain washing into a cliff.

The Wine-Jar Maiden

If I leap through this window, a cloak of my heart-scent may hang to me. I shall touch the cloak, now and then, and that shall be my life.

The Mad Shepherd

I must sit here, and whirl with my young spirit. If I cannot knit together strands of music better than the tune I ran after, then I should not have chased it.

(After a short silence the Narcissus Peddler and the Slender Nun, hand in hand, leap through the window-corner and vanish. The Wine Jar Maiden leaps after them, a moment later, and also disappears. The Mad Shepherd sits down and blows little fragments of piping into his reed, long pauses separating them. As he does this, he looks up at the window, his head motionless. The Narcissus Peddler, the Slender Nun and the Wine Jar

Maiden appear from the left walking slowly, in single file, as though in a trance. The Narcissus Peddler stands beside his basket, which he left behind him; the Wine Jar Maiden beside her jar, and the Slender Nun between them.)

The Mad Shepherd (*looking up, astonished*)

You return, like sleep-drooping poplar trees that have been given wings, and after long journeyings, fly back to their little blue-green hills.

The Narcissus Peddler

After we sprang we found ourselves in a high corridor, whose air was like the breath of a dying maiden—the corridor we first walked down, before we came to this palest purple window.

The Mad Shepherd (*wonderingly*)

A dream with a strange, buried, quivering palace whose doors are closed. . . .

(*The poet quietly appears from the right. He is dressed in a deep crimson robe, pale brown turban and black sandals; his head is bare. He surveys the others a moment, then touches the shoulder of the Wine Jar Maiden. She turns and stares at him. The others turn also.*)

You are all in my heart—a wide space with many buried, black palaces, huge pale-purple windows, hills with rocks for mad shepherds, strolling flower-venders, wine-jar maidens dancing in high courtyards hushed with quilted star-light, and sometimes a slender nun walking alone through the aisles of old reveries. I have woven you into a poem, and you were drawn on by me. But when my poems are made I take my people to a far-off garden in my heart. There we sit beneath

one of the shining trees and talk. There I shall give you your soul, your heart, your song—and your huge narcissus flower. And out of them make other poems, perhaps? Who knows? Come.

(He leads them away.)

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Bodenheim, Maxwell
Minna and myself

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